

# Rural Mental Health Research



At the National Institute  
of Mental Health

## FACT SHEET

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The nearly 60 million Americans living in rural and frontier areas have the same kinds of mental health problems and needs for services as individuals who live in urban and suburban areas. Among rural populations, the prevalence of mental illness, substance abuse and disability due to these problems is equal to or greater than in urban populations.

Yet, rural areas have unique characteristics that present barriers to mental health care. Access to and availability of mental health specialists, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses and social workers, are seriously lacking. Poverty, geographic isolation and cultural differences further hinder the amount and quality of mental health care available to people in rural areas.

More than 800 rural counties have high poverty rates, but only 25% of people living in rural areas qualify for Medicaid - compared to 43% in urban areas. Women head 46% of rural households, and of these families, 27% are living below the poverty level, compared to 9% of male-headed rural families. The elderly are disproportionately represented in rural areas. Many residents of remote rural areas who suffer from mental illnesses do not seek care. As in urban areas, people do not seek care in part because of the stigma associated with mental illness, the lack of understanding about mental illnesses and their treatments, the lack of information about where to go for treatment, and the inability to pay for care.

Of those people living in rural areas who do seek mental health services, a large percentage go to primary care physicians who may lack the training, time and resources to diagnose and treat mental illnesses effectively.

### An NIMH Snapshot

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is one of 25 components of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Government's principal biomedical and behavioral research agency. NIMH is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The actual total fiscal year 1999 NIMH budget was \$859 million.

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### NIMH Mission

To reduce the burden of mental illness through research on mind, brain, and behavior.

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### How Does the Institute Carry Out Its Mission?

- NIMH conducts research on mental disorders and the underlying basic science of brain and behavior.
- NIMH supports research on these topics at universities and hospitals around the United States.
- NIMH collects, analyzes, and disseminates information on the causes, occurrence, and treatment of mental illnesses.
- NIMH supports the training of more than 1,000 scientists to carry out basic and clinical research.
- NIMH communicates information to scientists, the public, the news media, and primary care and mental health professionals about mental illnesses, the brain, mental health, and research in these areas.

Cost of services is a major barrier. Many of the newer psychoactive medications are very expensive. Although rural residents have comparable rates of insurance, they have less comprehensive coverage. Thus, of those people who have medical insurance, many lack insurance coverage for psychotherapy - even if they can find a therapist in their area. And treatment combining medication and psychotherapy is usually not an option for people in rural areas.

Lack of quality inpatient care for severely mentally ill people is another serious problem in rural areas. These patients often must obtain care in hospitals that are located far from family and friends, or they are hospitalized in general medical settings where no psychiatric consultation is available. Once discharged back into the community, there are limited psychosocial rehabilitation services available and thus patients are often re-hospitalized at a very high cost compared to outpatient care.

NIMH is funding research on how to improve access to quality mental health services for people living in rural and frontier areas. Projects include research to determine whether the use of interactive electronic communications - telemedicine - to diagnose and treat mental disorders is as effective as face-to-face encounters in diagnosing and treating mental illnesses, and studies on how to enhance the quality of mental health care provided by/through rural primary care physicians.

NIMH-funded studies are also currently assessing how best to approach the longstanding and well-documented problem of access to culturally sensitive, high-quality mental health care on Indian reservations. Additional avenues of research are being proposed through NIMH-sponsored meetings of rural and frontier mental health experts.

## The Broad NIMH Research Program

In addition to rural mental health, NIMH supports and conducts a broad based, multi-disciplinary program of scientific inquiry aimed at improving the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of mental disorders. These illnesses include schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, clinical depression, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Increasingly, the public as well as health care professionals are recognizing these disorders as real and treatable medical illnesses of the brain. Still, there is a need for more research that examines in greater depth the relationships among genetic, behavioral, developmental, social, and other factors to find the causes of these illnesses. NIMH is meeting this need through a series of research initiatives.

### ■ NIMH Human Genetics Initiative

This project has compiled the world's largest registry of families affected by schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, and Alzheimer's disease. Scientists are able to examine the genetic material of these family members with the aim of pinpointing genes involved in the diseases.

### ■ Human Brain Project

This multi-agency effort is using state-of-the-art computer science technologies to organize the immense amount of data being generated through neuroscience and related disciplines, and to make this information readily accessible for simultaneous study by interested researchers.

### ■ Prevention Research Initiative

Prevention efforts seek to understand the development and expression of mental illness throughout life so that appropriate interventions can be found and applied at multiple points during the course of

illness. Recent advances in biomedical, behavioral, and cognitive sciences have led NIMH to formulate a new plan that marries these sciences to prevention efforts. While the definition of prevention will broaden, the aims of research will become more precise and targeted.

## More Than 2,000 Grants and Contracts

In total, NIMH supports more than 2,000 research grants and contracts at universities and other institutions across the nation and overseas. It also conducts basic research and clinical studies involving 9,000 patient visits per year at its own facilities on the National Institutes of Health campus in Bethesda, MD, and elsewhere. NIMH research projects focus on:

- basic research on behavior, emotion, and cognition to provide a knowledge base for a better understanding of mental illnesses
- basic sciences, including cellular and molecular biology, developmental neurobiology, neurochemistry, neurogenetics, and neuropharmacology, to provide

### NIMH Intramural Research Program

The NIMH Division of Intramural Research Programs (DIRP) encompasses a broad array of research activities that range from clinical investigation into the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illness to basic neuroscience studies conducted at the behavioral, systems, cellular, and molecular levels. DIRP is composed of more than 500 scientists working in 22 clinical branches and basic research laboratories, as well as four free-standing specialized research groups. Intramural research is conducted under the leadership of the Office of the Scientific Director.

### NIMH Research Divisions

- Division of Neuroscience and Basic Behavioral Science
- Division of Services and Intervention Research
- Division of Mental Disorders, Behavioral Research and AIDS
- Division of Intramural Research Programs

essential information about the anatomical and chemical basis of brain function and brain disorders

- neuroscience and behavioral aspects of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and behavioral strategies to reduce the spread of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus)
- interventions to treat, prevent, and reduce the frequency of mental disorders and their disabling consequences
- mental health services research, including mental health economics and improved methods of services delivery
- co-morbidity among mental disorders and with substance abuse and other medical conditions, such as depression and heart disease
- the prevalence of mental disorders
- risk factors for mental disorders
- differences in mental health and mental illness among special populations
- children and adolescents who suffer from or who are at risk for serious mental disorders and learning disabilities
- psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies for specific disorders

At the beginning of the 21st century, NIMH stands poised to surmount the burden, loss, and tragedy of mental illnesses that afflict millions of Americans.

## For More Information About NIMH

The Office of Communications and Public Liaison carries out educational activities and publishes and distributes research reports, press releases, fact sheets, and publications intended for researchers, health care providers, and the general public. A publications list may be obtained by contacting:

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Liaison, NIMH  
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NIMH home page address:  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

Anxiety Disorders Information:  
1-88-88-ANXIETY  
Depression Information: 1-800-421-4211

- Information about research opportunities at the NIMH Intramural Research Program may be obtained from:

Office of the Scientific Director, NIMH  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Building 10, Room 4N224, MSC 1381  
Bethesda, MD 20892-1381  
Phone: 301-496-3501  
FAX: 301-480-8348

- Information for scientists on NIMH grants and contracts programs, including grant application and review, Requests for Applications, Requests for Proposals, program announcements, research training and career development, small business programs, program analyses of NIMH extramural research grants and applications, access to NIH Grants policy, and other material may be obtained from the NIMH home page: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov).

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A specific example is:

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